How Much Is Enough?
Rethinking the Role of High School Courses in Admission

A Panel Discussion

Stephen Farmer, Jen Kretchmar, Chris Wiesen, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Richard Hazelton, The Hotchkiss School
Eileen Blattner, Shaker Heights High School
Laura Sellers, Cary Academy
From a PTA President

For the past several meetings we have been discussing concerns about the increase in academic stress of our students.

This year the school board has lifted several of the prerequisites for honors and AP courses. Several students are signing up for science AP courses as freshmen.

The policy that a student cannot take an online course if it is offered at the high school has been lifted. They can take any [college-level] course offered ... up to two courses per year and one during the summer.
What is the relationship between rigor of high school coursework and success in college?
Methodology

Sample: 3,626 students enrolling at UNC-Chapel Hill in Fall 2010

Predicted First Year College GPA = High School Program + SAT (CR+V) + High School Grades

CONTROL VARIABLES
Results
Results

- 0 courses = 3.07 GPA
- 5 courses = 3.26 GPA
- 10 courses = 3.25 GPA
Results

• There is a strong association between first-year GPA and number of college courses taken in high school when that number is between 0 and 5.

• The incremental gains in first-year GPA are smaller or non-existent when students take more than 5 college-level courses in high school.

• Our data are inconsistent with the more-rigor-is-always-better philosophy.
Possible Messages to Students

• If you take at least five academic courses each year in high school, including your senior year, and if those courses include five advanced courses, you can trust that your curriculum will be an asset to you in the competition for admission here.

• Our admissions committee won’t fault you for not taking every advanced course that you possibly could.

• Rather than loading up on more credentials, we’d like to see you have a well-balanced high school experience. That’s not an excuse to slack off—we want to see you spend time pursuing your interests, cultivating your curiosity, and developing other aspects of yourself.
Questions to Consider

• If students who take extreme programs, on average, don’t perform better on our campus than those who take merely rigorous programs, should we favor the former over the latter? If so, why? If not, why not?

• If we no longer favor candidates who take extreme programs over those who take rigorous programs, how will students and parents perceive this change?

• How might colleges, secondary schools, the College Board, and other organizations work together to discourage extreme programs if they work against the long-term interests of students and their families?